

## College Students Urged by Garamendi to Protest Cuts

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San Diego- Year after year it's the same story. The state can't balance its budget, extreme cuts to education are proposed, and college students protest about higher fees being the Band-Aid for the deficit.

This year is no different except that students like UC San Diego's Arundathi Gururajan are being recruited to challenge state lawmakers.

As financial debt obliterates student pocketbooks, students are looking to Lt. Gov. John Garamendi, who proposed freezing college fees at 2008-09 levels.

Gururajan, 21, a third-year student, said her financial debt is quickly approaching \$40,000. She and hundreds of others plan to lobby legislators in March at the University of California's annual student lobby day.

Garamendi, a vocal ex-officio UC regent, is encouraging students to protest massive cuts from higher education funding – a move that again will surely lead to a fee increase.

Regents were supposed to decide whether to cap fees last week, but Garamendi, sensing he couldn't get enough votes for the freeze, held the issue until March, when regents will meet in San Francisco.

"Fees are going to go up unless we can get the Legislature to give us more money," Garamendi said. "You've got to develop a political strategy about the cost for underfunding the education system. I frankly think students should march in Sacramento. You've got to protest. You've got to make your point known."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's recommendation to cut \$1.1 billion in higher education funding, with \$332 million coming from the University of California, also anticipates that UC would raise fees between 7 percent and 10 percent.

News of a possible increase was enough to prompt Gururajan to make a two-hour trek to Los Angeles on Thursday to implore regents to freeze fees.

"You guys need to make the first stand in supporting us," Gururajan said. "If you guys don't support us, then the Legislature won't."

Gururajan's mounting debt forces her to reflect each quarter, she said.

"Every quarter it's been a conversation with my parents on whether I'm going to be able to come back to college," she said. "They expect my family contribution (to student fees) to be over \$37,000. There's no way we can afford that."

After regents agreed to hold off voting on Garamendi's fee stabilization resolution until March, about 30 students chanted and marched out of the meeting.

As they continued to rally in another area of the building, Garamendi stopped by and encouraged them to continue being vocal.

"Stay with it," he told them. "You guys are very instrumental to where the university is going."

Public universities such as UC and California State University are meant to be affordable and accessible, but for David Preciado, 18, attending UC Santa Barbara has become a heart-wrenching decision.

He grew up with a single mother, who at age 50 makes \$24,000 a year cleaning homes. Still, she tries to contribute \$200 a month toward his student loans.

"I never knew what a struggle it would be," Preciado said. "I can't put my mom through that."

It costs about \$7,347 to attend UC San Diego for undergraduates who are state residents. That figure does not include housing.

Regents said they don't want the university to become financially out of reach, but they are grappling with having to make severe cuts while their only sure way of increasing revenue is by raising fees.

"We have to help the state understand how vital the university is," said regent George Marcus. "We can't lay it on the backs of students and faculty. It's time to take a stand."

Gururajan said she and her fellow students are tired of bearing the brunt of what they see as fiscal irresponsibility.

"It seems like every time there's a shortfall in money, instead of finding ways to fix it, they just raise the fees," she said.

Regents haven't decided how they will make cuts, but during a presentation last week, several measures were proposed, including cutting back on student mental health services. Other ideas were limiting enrollment growth, raising fees and not offering faculty raises.

In March, when regents traditionally decide whether they raise fees, Gururajan believes that students will not get their way despite their efforts.

“I hate to say it, but I do think fees will go up a little bit,” Gururajan said. “But hopefully not in the large percentages that they are talking about.”